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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DAMASCUS 000851

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SUBJECT: IRAQI EMBASSY REPORTS MORE SYRIA-IRAQ TENSION

REF: DAMASCUS 820

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Chuck Hunter for reasons 1.4(b,d)

1.(C) SUMMARY: The Iraqi Embassy reported a telephone call following last week's Eid al-Adha holiday between the directors of the Syrian and Iraqi Prime Ministers' offices "did not go well," underscoring continued tension between Damascus and Baghdad. The Syrian side reportedly placed the call to encourage Iraqi Foreign Minister Zebari to attend the December 15 Arab-Turkish forum in Damascus and to obtain GOI assistance for Syrian trucks carrying refrigerated food products that were stuck on the Syrian-Iraqi border. The Iraqi Embassy told us the Iraqis remain concerned about broadcasts from Syria by a new anti-GOI television station called "Saddam" and were annoyed by a report published in a Syrian newspaper claiming that new Iraqi government security installations on the Iraqi-Syrian border were provided by Israel. The Turkish Embassy, on the other hand, believes the SARG is looking for ways to improve relations with Baghdad, if only to get the trucks moving again, and may explore ideas for doing so during the Turkish foreign minister's visit to Damascus next week. END SUMMARY.

TELEPHONE CALL BETWEEN PM OFFICES DOESN'T GO WELL

¶2. (C) According to the Iraqi Embassy in Damascus, the director of Syrian Prime Minister Mohammad Naji al-Otri's office called his counterpart in Iraq following last week's Eid al-Adha holiday. According to Ahmed Ubaid, the Iraqi Embassy's media attache, the Syrians expressed concern about Syrian trucks stranded at the Syrian-Iraqi border. According to Iraqi and Syrian contacts, Syrian trucks carrying refrigerated goods bound for Iraqi markets are facing significant delays in getting approval to cross the border into Iraq. Al-Hayat Bureau Chief Ibrahim Hamid (strictly protect) said sources in FM Muallem's office reported that a call took place, possibly at a higher level between the prime ministers themselves, and claimed Syria responded positively by urging the Iraqis to send FM Zebari to attend the December 15 Turkish-Arab Forum in Damascus. Ubaid said the call "did not go well." The Syrian trucks continued to face delays, and the GOI was not backing down from accusations the SARG is hosting Iraqi Baathists responsible for terrorist attacks in Iraq, he explained.

¶3. (C) Ubaid said the delay of Syrian trucks at the border underscored Syrian-Iraqi tension. "They have called us frequently regarding trucks at the border. We need to keep the border safe, and they want everything to go through," Ubaid related. Ubaid said the Iraqi Embassy received calls from lower-level officials on a daily basis regarding Syrian trucks that are being blocked from entering Iraq by Iraqi border guards. Syrian businessmen trading in Iraq confirm their products are not getting through to Iraqi markets.

IRAQIS CONCERNED ABOUT NEW BAATHIST TELEVISION STATION

¶ 4. (C) While the SARG expresses frustration with Baghdad's decision to severely restrict the movement of trucks ferrying Syrian goods across the border, the Iraqi Embassy remains concerned about a new anti-GOI television station called "Saddam," with possible links to Iraqi Baathists Izzat al-Douri and Mishan al-Jabouri. "Saddam" recently completed its inaugural two-day broadcast during Eid al-Adha, marking the 3rd anniversary of Saddam's execution. In addition, al-Jabouri's television station "al-Rai," which broadcasts from Damascus and had been criticized by the Iraqi government as a platform for terrorists, is still on the air despite reports that the station was being closed, complained Ubaid. (NOTE: Syrian media reports on November 23 stated Syrian businessman Rami Makhlouf had purchased all the equipment for "al-Rai" from Jabouri and his Syrian wife, Rawa'a al-Usta, who jointly owned the station. A subsequent report quoted Makhlouf as denying the story. END NOTE.)

¶ 5. (C) Ubaid reported the Iraqis were attempting to confirm that "Saddam" broadcast its inaugural programming from an office in the Damascus suburb of Yafour. He criticized "Saddam" and "al-Rai," and suggested both stations had received financial support from Syrians. Ubaid related the GOI had not been able to confirm the location of "Saddam's" broadcasting site, but said the embassy was convinced the SARG and prominent Syrian businessmen had supported "Saddam" and "al-Rai."

¶ 6. (C) The Iraqis also took umbrage at a report published in the Syrian newspaper al-Watan on December 6 claiming that new Iraqi government security installations on the Iraqi-Syrian

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border were using Israeli-supplied equipment. Claiming that the SARG had approved placing the story in the newspaper, Ubaid said the article was calculated to embarrass the Iraqi government. "Everything the Syrians do, including stories like this that they put in the newspaper, sends a message," Ubaid declared, noting the Israeli reference was meant to be an especially stinging criticism. Acknowledging the large number of Iraqi accents around him at a Damascus cafe, Ubaid said, "We can't deny the Syrians have welcomed a lot of Iraqis here in the last six years. But the situation between the two governments is getting worse, and will get even worse," he concluded.

CAN THE TURKS HELP?

¶ 7. (C) Turkish DCM Aydin Acikel (strictly protect) told us December 8 that the Syrian MFA had quietly requested a meeting with FM Davutogulu to discuss relations between Syria and Iraq during the Turkish FM's December 14-15 visit to Damascus and that the Turkish ambassador to Iraq might attend. Acikel said he sensed the Syrian government was looking for ways to improve relations with Baghdad if only to solve the immediate problem of traffic jams at border crossings. VP advisor Mohamed Nassif Khayrbick would also participate in the talks. Acikel asked whether U.S. concerns regarding Syrian support for foreign fighters and former Iraqi regime elements still applied. Hearing a positive response, Acikel suggested the Turks would urge the Syrians to take positive steps to ease bilateral tension with Iraq. Acikel was unsure whether FM Zebari planned to attend the Turkish-Arab Forum, and he worried that today's attacks in Baghdad would harden Iraqi resolve against Syria. Still, he said Ankara viewed Syria's request to discuss Syrian-Iraqi relations as a positive sign that might be used to re-establish diplomatic contacts.

HUNTER